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DAILY TELEGRAPH 17 OCTOBER 1987 Snoop's eye on the CIA

FOR MORE than a year, Britain has been gripped by the saga surrounding Peter Wright's book "Spycatcher" and the British Government's unsuccessful attempts to suppress its publication. In America, they do these things on an altogether different scale.

Bob Woodward, the superhero of American investigative journalism, sought out the dying former head of the American Central Intelligence Agency, William Casey, a man who by any standards ought to have shunned his company. The astonished journalist was granted not one interview, but four dozen, which form the substance of this book. It is as if Sir Maurice Oldfield had settled down to dictate his memoirs to Paul Foot. The American Government, in this case, has done precisely nothing.

The reason may be that the bleary-eyed, stumble-worded conspirator depicted in the book may have thought he could pull one over Mr Woodward. Who better to present an old spy-master's departing world view than the impeccably anti-establishment Mr Woodward, dazzled at having penetrated the innermost sanctum of the anti-christ, the CIA? If so, Casey has for the most part succeeded.

There is very little in the book that is either new, or particularly startling. Casey's successor, William Webster, has deplored the fact that a couple of agents out in the field have been "burnt" by Casey's indiscretions. Mr Woodward's allegation that El Salvador's President Duarte was a CIA "agent" who "may not have known he was giving information to the CIA" has ruffled the feathers of a small American ally; but then,

VEIL: the Secret Wars and the CIA, 1981-1987.
 By Bob Woodward.
 Simon & Schuster. £14.95.

if Mr Duarte didn't know, he can hardly be blamed, can he?

Mr Woodward's one really horrifying revelation is that 80 people were killed by a car bomb in Lebanon in 1985 in a CIA-instigated attempt to kill a prominent Shia terrorist, Sheikh Fadlallah. The lesson from this is that such things should not be left to incompetent surrogates: the Saudi security forces had been given charge of the operation.

The central theme of the book, that Casey conducted a covert foreign policy in parallel to the State Department, is unsurprising. The CIA, like most intelligence agencies, is directly responsible to the head of government and to some extent inevitably competes with the Foreign Service professionals. Casey's picture of the CIA's intelligence-gathering in Iran — CIA cables "had little more factual content than the daily newspaper and television reports" — suggests serious shortcomings, but also a less sinister organisation than Mr Woodward would have us believe.

One thing the CIA did get right was the death of the Soviet leader, Konstantin Chernenko, which the agency claims happened days before its official announcement. At the time Casey reckoned, wrongly, that Mr Gorbachev would be no different from his predecessors.

Mr Woodward has little new to offer on the most controver-

sial subject in the book, Iran-gate, an operation carried out by Casey's protégé, Col Oliver North. The scandal shows the CIA in its most reckless and cynical light, using money from selling arms to Iran, in a forlorn attempt to extricate American hostages, to provide funding to Nicaragua's contra guerrillas. The first was bad policy, the second illegal.

If, as seems now to have been rather inconclusively established, President Reagan knew nothing of this, then Casey was indeed guilty of conducting an "alternative" foreign policy, and a thoroughly discreditable one at that. Yet Mr Woodward sheds no light on the question of whether the President was told and not much on whether even Casey knew. The book ends, in its inimitable gumshoe prose, with a now celebrated deathbed confession:

You knew, didn't you, I said ... you knew all along. His head jerked up hard. He stared and finally nodded yes. Why? I asked, "I believed." What? "I believed." Then he was asleep, and I didn't get to ask another question.

This account has since been challenged by Casey's widow, who says Mr Woodward could not have got into the closely guarded hospital room. This seems beside the point: more glaring is the way the journalist hangs his book on an anecdote so clearly open to misunderstanding, and his quasi-macabre pushiness.

Reading Mr Woodward, the "new journalism" sounds rather old, harking back to dear old foot-in-the-door reporting and a dated Chandler writing style; its methods seem no more dignified than the undercover work condemned in this book.

Robert Harvey